

Six propositions on the sonics of pornography

Article (Accepted Version)

Mowlabocus, Sharif and Medhurst, Andy (2017) Six propositions on the sonics of pornography. *Porn Studies*, 4 (2). pp. 210-224. ISSN 2326-8751

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/59809/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

SIX PROPOSITIONS ON THE SONICS OF PORNOGRAPHY

Sharif Mowlabocus – University of Sussex

Andy Medhurst – University of Sussex

Abstract

Pornography (and all its contentious pleasures, contested politics and attendant problematics) is enjoying a fresh wave of academic attention (See, inter alia, Nikunen et al., 2007, Hall & Bishop, 2007, Magnet, 2007, Attwood, 2010). The overwhelming majority of these studies, however, focus on the visual discourses of sexually explicit material. This risks the sonic dimensions of pornography being overlooked entirely. Yet porn is anything but silent.

This speculative article maps out some of the ways in which the sounds of pornography (and the pornography of sound) might be approached in the analytical context of gay male culture. Not only do the texts of porn contain assorted sounds (dialogue, soundtracks, non-verbal noises of participation, background and accidental audio), they also seek to prompt sounds (not least the non-verbal noises pornography seeks to elicit during the moments of its consumption) and sometimes depend on sound alone (telephone lines that allow access to recorded narratives or ‘live’ chat). Pornography speaks in particular accents, it mobilises particular music, it dances to particular tunes, and it relies on the pants we hear as much as the pants we see. If queer cultures have their own distinctive worlds of sound, then the sonic armouries of porn play a prominent role within them.

Keywords: Pornography; sound; voice; gay men; music; sonic.

SIX PROPOSITIONS ON THE SONICS OF PORNOGRAPHY

Introduction – Porn Studies: Hard of hearing?

While celebrating the renewed critical focus on pornography in the academy, we draw attention in this article to a blind spot that has been present within the field of porn studies since its inception, and which we seek to address in the following pages. It is perhaps unsurprising that, for the most part, porn studies has been deaf to the sounds of the pornographic. Many of the established scholars who have written on the subject of pornography (including Mandy Merck (1987), Linda Williams (1993, 1999, 2004), John Mercer (2003, 2004) and Richard Dyer (1985, 1994)) have intellectual backgrounds rooted in film studies; a discipline that has continually struggled to remember to listen. It was some decades into the growth of film as an academic discipline before studies emerged reminding readers that sound factors were cinematically crucial.

Claudia Gorbman's landmark study *Unheard Melodies*, first published in 1987, is an emblematic title, both for not appearing until the late 1980s, and for implying via its title that a sensory balance needed to be redressed. Although today there are a number of volumes addressing the many and complex links between the visual and aural aspects of cinema, between looking and listening, this was not always the case. In the first decades that saw the struggle take place to establish Film as a valid object of academic enquiry, sound was strikingly neglected, and it was only in the 1980s that a real breakthrough was made in acknowledging the importance of cinematic sonics.

Revealingly, the titles of Film Studies publications, and studies of pornography influenced by Film Studies, often disclose the enduring centrality of this primacy of the eye. The most influential Film Studies journal (in the Anglophone academy) was called *Screen*, not 'Screen and Speaker', while Linda Williams foundational 'porn theory' book *Hard Core* had the word 'visible' in its subtitle, even though her analysis itself does incorporate some considerations of pornography's sonics. The work of Williams and the other scholars cited above do show an awareness of the aural dimension of the material under their purview. Nevertheless, the fact remains

that the disciplinary toolbox from which many scholars of pornography borrow from today perpetually privileges sight over sound.

This deprioritising of sound in pornography reflects the apparent lack of attention given to the soundscapes employed in porn. While directors are keen to *show* sex in ever increasing detail, they appear less interested in capturing the sounds of sex. Soundscapes are regularly added to commercial pornography during post-production and bear only a passing relationship to the action represented on the screen. Commenting on the production techniques of hard-core pornographic cinema, Williams (1999) suggests that ‘hard-core sound ... seeks an effect of closeness and intimacy rather than of spatial reality’ (123-124). In a genre that relies on ‘witnessing’ sex and on provides a (hyper) real presence of sexuality (see King, 1996), the focus on sonic intimacy rather than aural reality undermines the pornographic text’s claim of realness and authenticity. Even when sound is recorded live, it remains the case that the director’s primary interest is on the visual as opposed to the sonic components of the text. Meanwhile, from the audience’s perspective, sound might in fact be an unwelcome accompaniment to the consumption of pornographic text. In response to an earlier draft of this paper, one colleague reminded us that porn is often consumed in a covert manner. Hearing the sounds of porn can ‘blow your cover’, sometimes with dire consequences. It is from this premise that we make the following six propositions regarding the sonics of pornography.

The focus of this article remains within the realm of pornography aimed at gay men. To try and extend the range any further in a single piece would make our agenda insupportably cumbersome, and to inflate the title with anxious qualifiers would dilute how it sounds; and this is, if nothing else, a study which is deeply committed to taking the signification of sounding seriously. Our methodology acknowledges the fact that in today’s digital environment, pornography is often consumed differently to how it was two decades ago. The architecture of the netporn economy, comprising Tube sites, TGP listings and Porn Tumblrs, invites consumers to take a more ‘rhizomatic’ approach to consumption than ever before. As such, our approach to sampling and analysing pornography in this article reflects this ‘distracted’ approach to digital porn consumption today. We are aware that, to some, our examples might be

considered as too specific and our sampling technique, unfocused. In response to such criticisms, we argue that the sheer volume and diversity of pornography available today means that traditional methods of corpus selection contrives to suggest clear boundaries and lines of demarcation that otherwise do not exist in digital pornography today. In this way, one could say our methodology reflects the speculative nature of our investigation.

Proposition one: English traditional folk music and avant-garde jazz have one thing in common. (On the uses and role of music in pornography).

Music plays a central role within cultural imaginings of pornography. Within popular culture the pornographic is most often signified through musical genres and styles associated with sexual representation and revelation. From the Big Band sound of 'The Stripper' to the heavy bass and electro funk of the 1970s (aka 'pornogroove') through to the 'Bom Chicka Wah Wah' of the early 2000's Lynx deodorant advertisement campaign, it seems that most often we signify the pornographic aurally. Indeed, censorship of the visual aspects of pornography within the public sphere means that where references to the pornographic are made in popular culture, or within everyday discourse, (often as a point of humour), it is regularly through sound and most commonly through *music* that we refer to the explicitly sexual, the performatively sexual and the knowingly sexual.

Cante & Restivo (2001) assert that 'if anything distinguishes the textual aesthetics of porn ... isn't it the conventional, cheaply produced, repetitive music which accompanies the scenes ... ?' However cheap, repetitive or conventional this music might be, it is nevertheless an important element of the pornographic text. Gaines' (2004) remarks that 'the music track and the image track can so easily carry the same meanings when brought together in the motion picture.' (34) and music serves to create meaning in gay male pornography in three specific ways. Firstly, the type of music used in gay male pornography may echo other leisure activities and experiences within gay male subculture. While it is extremely rare to find commercial gay male pornography using well-known music (copyright being a key issue here) consumers of gay porn may consume similar genres of music during other leisure practices, and particularly within the commercial spaces of the urban gay scene.

Using contemporary dance music styles in porn not only provides an aural backdrop, it helps to further code the text, layering it with meaning and (sub)cultural resonance¹.

Secondly, certain styles of music appear to reflect certain genres of gay male pornography, perhaps even certain types of bodies and performances. For example, and as with much of the gay male pornography that fits the 'European twink' genre, *Lukas in Love* (Dir. Duroy, 2005), employs cloying and overly sentimental music that endlessly loops through each sexual scenario. Yet this music is not out of place in this genre of hard-core. Indeed, it has become the hallmark of this type of porn, conveying a sense of innocence, romance and purity. This is not to suggest that the audience of *Lukas in Love* are expecting anything other than their favourite porn star having sex with numerous men over the course of 145 minutes. This isn't a conventional love story. Nevertheless, there is a relationship between the choice of music and this genre of pornography.

Similarly, it is not uncommon for films that depict more extreme sexual representations (bareback gangbangs, BDSM, urination, military or rape fantasies), or which utilise a 'grittier' aesthetic and narrative, to employ music that helps to 'secure' the generic identification of (and with) the text. In the recent *TrigaFilms* production, *Sunday Morning Shag* (2015) the extra-diegetic sound includes fast-paced techno music that relies on a repetitive, synthesised drum-beat, little melody and no vocals. The anonymous, 'disposable' dance music works to 'validate' the illusion set up by the narrative; that this is the bedroom of 'Chavlad Chris' and that the performers have been 'up all night'; that this Sunday morning began on Saturday night.

The cheaply produced, repetitive techno used in the film has strong class associations in the UK, aligned as it is with white working-class youth culture. The poor quality of the sound reproduction, twinned with the mediocre quality of the music itself, is reminiscent of the type of music one might hear emanating from a cheap mobile phone speaker. Here, the choice of music works to support the illusion of working-class masculinity at play. The techno becomes the aural equivalent of a 'hoodie' or

See also Frith, 1996; Haslop et al. 1998; Connell & Gibson, 2003; Laughey, 2006 and Williams, 2006;

tradesman's uniform; a symbol of the 'despised' culture that *TrigaFilms* eroticises for its gay male audience.

These two examples demonstrate how music, while rarely privileged, nevertheless plays an important supporting role in pornography. Whether it be used as a generic convention, an allusion to the leisure practices of the characters represented, or a form of aural 'wallpaper', music adds to the pornographic text and strengthens the text's meaning.

Finally, in suggesting that the music track can carry the same meanings as the pornographic image, we need to be aware of those musical genres that might perhaps struggle to support such meaning. To refer back to the title of this first proposition, what do traditional folk music and avant-garde jazz have in common? They don't appear to regularly feature in the gay male pornographer's repertoire. Avant-garde jazz (the music of Archie Shepp, say, or Cecil Taylor) is arguably too abrasive and edgy, to determinedly antipathetic to 'background music' status, to function as a plausible soundtrack to pornographic scenes. Although stemming from a very different cultural heritage, the ballads and narratives of traditional English folk similarly appear to offer little opportunity for pornographic appropriation.

Of course, there are always exceptions to such rules. In conversation with the authors of this paper, Mandy Merck has identified the use of folk music in 1970s lesbian pornography, reflecting the popularity and importance of folk-influenced acoustic styles within the musical tastes of many lesbian subcultures. Similarly, John Mercer (during review) has identified the use of 'folkish' music in the experimental film *L.A. Plays Itself* (Halsted, 1972) and the crossover hit *Boys in the Sand* (Poole, 1971). The immense diversity of pornography, twinned with its long history inevitably means that outliers can be identified. However, if anything, such black swans only serve to further prove our point that certain genres and types of music are more commonly used in pornography, than others. Of course, the music that features in pornography might not be prioritised by either the producer or the consumer, but often it frames the pornographic text, providing a bridge between the text and the cultures in which it might be consumed.

Proposition 2 - Men Moan, Shriek, Gasp and Sigh too. (Sexual sounds and noises)

Writing on the role of the female orgasm within popular sound, Corbett and Kapsalis (1996) rework William's famous claim by asserting that 'female sexual pleasure is better thought of in terms of a "frenzy of the audible" than of the visual' (103). Listening to Donna Summer's 1975 hit 'Love to Love you (baby)' or 'French Kiss' by Lil Louis (1989)² it is difficult to disagree with this argument; the female orgasm - multiple, fractured, and immeasurable - surpasses the visual registers of heterosexual pornography.

Gay male pornography requires visual proof of sexual climax although an argument can be made for 'gendering' orgasms here. Where 'tops' are always expected to ejaculate, 'bottoms' are typically expected to maintain an orgasmic 'sound' throughout intercourse. The 'anal orgasm', like its vaginal sister, resists easy visual identification but remains identifiable (if not authenticated) via sonic registers³. This is not to say that 'bottoms' don't ejaculate, but hierarchies of ejaculation *are* often present in gay male porn. For instance, the climax of a scene is often signalled by the *top* reaching orgasm. However, their (visual) orgasm is often secondary to the 'showstopping' performance of the top. Meanwhile, their vocal performance during the scene can be aligned with the stereotypical moaning, panting and gasping of the female performer in heterosexual porn. This splitting up of the 'visual top' and the 'aural bottom' is by no means mandatory in gay male porn, but where it does appear, it often echoes older inscriptions of gendered stereotypes regarding sex roles. In doing so it also (re)affirms the ongoing relegation of sound to the domain of the feminine⁴. To repeat, the masculine orgasm is seen, the feminine, heard.

Yet this gendered dichotomy disintegrates when we acknowledge that *all* bodies make sounds during sex. Whether on the screen, or in front of it, men (even the most

² Both of which were popular tracks in the gay clubs of their respective eras.

³ Dean's (2009) work here on the 'anal orgasm' is of particular note here, although again, the elevation of the anal orgasm is only through the development of a new specular regime.

⁴ Echoing the marginalisation of female sexual pleasure and agency within the production and consumption of porn.

masculine ones) also moan, shriek, gasp and sigh. Indeed the sound of sex can underscore the intensity of the visual experience. As Williams (2008: 83) suggests, ‘the smooch of a kiss [...] the slurp of fellatio [...] the whoosh of penetration’ all serve to make sex appear ‘all the more proximate to the viewer-listener’. As sound scholars such as Bull and Back (2003) and Ihde (2012) remind us, sound envelops us and is inescapable – we can look away but we cannot stop listening. Short of muting the television or switching off the computer speakers we have no choice but to hear the sounds of sex.

Such sounds also create an ambiguity in terms of reception. We can’t stop hearing the sound of porn, but can we ever really trust it? Can we ever be sure that the performer from whom the sounds of sexual ecstasy emanate really is turned on? In 1989 Meg Ryan proved to the world (and the diners of Katz deli⁵) the ease with which the sound of sexual pleasure could be fabricated. While the veracity of the male orgasm goes unchallenged when it is visually recorded yet the sounds of sex remain unstable and unverifiable. Given the fact that the soundtrack to porn rarely gets the same level of attention as the visual aspects of the text, this instability can be intensified, undercutting our enjoyment of the spectacle.

**Proposition Three: Sports commentary excites – barking dogs deflate.
(Background sound and noise)**

Ambient sounds, whether accidental or intentional, can play an important role in our understanding and appreciation of pornography. They can also ruin our enjoyment – or perhaps offer differing modes of enjoyment, depending on the noise. Dean (2009) describes the importance of external, unscripted ‘street noise’ in the work of Paul Morris, director and owner of *Treasure Island Media*, writing that ‘the graininess of the soundtrack ... complements the grittiness of the action’ (Dean, 2009: 82).

⁵ In the film *When Harry Met Sally* (dir. Reiner, 1989)

This notion of sound securing the authenticity of the pornographic text can also be found within more conventional ‘mainstream’ forms of gay male pornography. ‘Gay for pay’ narratives⁶ regularly feature the sound of ‘straight porn’ being played in the background, off-camera. Such sounds act as a marker of the performer’s (purported) heterosexual masculinity: his sexual performance with another man (or, in the case of solo scene, for an assumed male audience,) relies on the (off-camera) heterosexual pornography providing the ‘real’ sexual stimulus. Examples of such sonic referencing can be found in the videos featured at *Jaysstraightguys.com*. The material on this amateur site regularly includes the familiar sound (though not the sight) of female porn performers, often at the beginning of a scene. Such inclusion serves to anchor the heterosexuality of the performers and validate the central claim of the website – that these performers are straight.

Sounds need not be pornographic for them to similarly be used as markers of authenticity in porn and sounds of the domestic interior can signal veracity, supporting the claims and promises made by the prod/user. Hence the *XTube* video entitled ‘Jerking while Mom’s watching TV’, gains credence through the inclusion of both the mother’s voice and the sound of a football match being televised. The veracity of the claim made in the title is supported solely by the soundscape.

Of course, the ‘accidental’ sounds of dogs barking, incongruous music choices⁷ or a television game show may well also provide distractions that inhibit the consumer’s enjoyment of the text. At other times, such sounds need further qualification for them to become relevant. Again, the user-generated material commonly found on Tube sites such as *PornHub* and *Tube8* provides ample examples of this qualification. Here, the written commentary provided by the prod/user enhances our understanding (of the pornographic text through an explanation of the seemingly unrelated soundscape.

⁶ We use the term ‘gay-for-pay’ here to indicate a narrative device commonly used in contemporary gay porn, where the scene is structured around a narrative of exchange or payment in kind. A typical narrative within this genre would be a (younger, heterosexual) tenant is invited to perform sexual favours on the landlord in lieu of payment. Other examples include ‘broke’ heterosexually-identifying men being paid increasing amounts of money to perform various sex acts on each other. In this sense, our use of ‘gay-for-pay’ refers to narrative as opposed to the ‘real’ sexual identity of the performers. *Brokestraightboys.com* and *straighttrentboys.com* are two notable examples of studios that use this ‘gay-for-pay’ narrative.

⁷ While researching this paper, one of the authors came across an instance where the performance of intergenerational group sex and ‘dirty talk’ was starkly contrasted by the choice of music on the bedroom stereo; Tina Turner, it transpires, is not as erotic as one might think.

SensualDesire83's 2012 video, for example, features a naked man masturbating to climax in an outside setting. The soundscape includes birds tweeting, at least two different dogs barking, cars passing by and an extractor fan intermittently switching on and off. These sounds at first appear distracting and unnecessary. However, to the user they operate on multiple levels:

I finally got the nerve to be one with nature! I set the camera up outside, became daring by taking my clothes off and masturbating. You can hear the neighbor's ****barking at me and also the traffic going by, however, I was not seen. At least I don't think I was. If you pay close attention, you can even hear my cum hitting the leaves as it falls to the ground. I have to admit, this was very very thrilling!"

(‘Cumming Outside’ by SensualDesire83)

Here, the sonic environment not only acts as a signifier of authenticity, but also carries with it an erotic charge for the user. As SensualDesire83 explains, his presence is detected by the neighbour's dog(s) and the everyday sounds captured on the recording serve to heighten the excitement he feels as he experiments with public nudity and sexual practice. Finally, the sound of the ejaculate hitting the leaves underfoot provides an added (and arguably unexpected) thrill for SensualDesire83.

These sonic ‘interruptions’ might well be considered the aural equivalent of the accidental objects that often appear in the self-portraits used on dating and hook-up websites and apps (such as Grindr, Recon, Gaydar, FitLads etc). Like the accidental sounds discussed above, the domestic interiors (bathroom, bedroom, living room), that often act as the backdrop for the selfie provide viewers of with a wealth of unintended detail and may serve to confirm the ‘authenticity’ of the user's identity performance, or provide an unwitting distraction from it⁸.

Proposition Four - David Beckham should be gagged (voices in pornography)

⁸ See Mowlabocus (2010) for further discussion of profile images on gay men's dating sites.

"One of those sort of voices. Tight jeans and little 'taches. In my day they wore suede shoes and were generally called Guy."

(Maud Grimes, *Coronation Street*)

In mainstream film, voices can play a key role in star performances, particularly in relation to gendered identity. Writing about the masculinity of Clint Eastwood, Gill Branston draws attention to the role that a (limited) vocal repertoire plays in the actor's performances,

'Eastwood's voice and speech maintain the restricted range of a Western hero, deeply distrusting vocal mobility, 'fancy words' and... intimate, fluid conversation'

(Branston, 1995: 45-46)

Branston's appraisal of Eastwood's voice and the evaluation of the unnamed visitor provided by Maud Grimes suggest two masculinities that are poles apart. Along with the clothes and stylised facial hair, Grimes' identification of 'one of those voices' is a clear signifier of male queerness. Grimes knows what she is alluding to when she makes reference to the stranger she has encountered and the audience at home likewise understands what is (not) being said by the local busybody. The word 'camp' cannot be avoided here, and it is notable firstly that camp is coded vocally in the vast majority of texts which present characters who merit that description (the fussy, prissy voice of the queen is often what announces his arrival and confirms his effeminate marginality) and secondly that the antipathy towards camp in gay pornography is crystallised among other ways in the reluctance towards camp speech patterns among men offered up as objects of desire.

In gay male pornography performers are rarely chosen because of their voices. There *are* notable vocal performances that do stand out. The verbose Jeff Stryker delivered his sexual commands in a deep, rich timbre, while Jon Vincent employed his commanding baritone voice to great effect. More recently, the Dutch porn star Peto Coast is noticeably sparing in his verbal repertoire, his silence contrasting the

physicality and endurance of his performances, as well as the vocal input of his co-stars. Indeed, Coast's efficiency with language surpasses even that of Eastwood.

While particular types of voice can contribute to the erotic appeal of a performer, for the most part the visual aesthetics of a performer are prioritised over their vocal skills. Yet voices *are* heard in pornography. Beyond the embodied sounds of sex discussed in proposition two, performers speak – to one another, to themselves, to the director and, less often, to us, the audience. At these points, the vocal aesthetics can disrupt one of the central illusions of gay male pornography – the illusion that these performers are either gay-for-pay, or can at least 'pass' for straight:

"I remember once watching porn with some friends of mine... and there was dialogue and the performers were so gay. They sound like we do...they sound like the four of us sitting around planning a gangbang... You never actually hear the men talking to the point where you can acknowledge that they might sound a little bit gay"

(Morrison, 2004: 179-180)

What Morrison's research participants identify here is the disruptive capacity of the 'gay voice' in gay male pornography. Intonation, phraseology, innuendo, camp humour, pitch, timbre and speed all conspire to 'reveal' that which the performance most often seeks to disavow – the inherent *queerness* of gay porn. This might sound strange; rarely is sex between men considered to be a heteronormative activity. Yet such queer disavowal can be found in the advertising for gay male porn, which draws upon reservoirs of masculinity that are most commonly aligned with heterosexuality.

Such performances of (hyper) masculinity are all well and good – until someone starts talking. Morrison's respondents identify the central problem with voices in much gay male porn. Indeed, even when heterosexual masculinity is assured (as in the case of David Beckham), one's voice can still undermine or 'queer' that identification.

British performer Paddy O'Brian is an interesting case to consider in this context. Long identifying as heterosexual and 'gay for pay', O'Brian's popularity and critical

acclaim is matched only by the level of criticism that he has faced regarding his sexual identity. His decision in 2013 to 'bottom' received a mixed reaction and fuelled further speculation (and disapproval) that he was in fact in the closet. Of particular interest here is the way in which his critics have alluded to his voice in their attacks on his performance and his identity:

'Paddy looks hot, but his voice undoes the attraction.'

'Rough voice? You are not talking about Paddy.'

'In what country, is this voice considered masculine?'

'He would be very hot if he had a masculine voice.'

'His voice is such a turnoff.'

(Taken from Datalounge website)

As another critic (Jay 357), posting on the *Queerity* website, writes, Paddy O'Brian is often considered 'a best keep your mouth shut sort of guy'.

While others find his voice (and accent) a turn on, O'Brian is a contemporary example of how a voice can make or break the common fantasy peddled by pornography; that the performers are either heterosexual or can pass for straight. This is not to suggest that all performers 'sound gay' (as we have already mentioned). Nor is it to suggest that all voices in gay male pornography are disruptive. The male voice alone can be effective enough to create and maintain a pornographic imaginary. Nevertheless attention should be paid to the utterances contained within the pornographic text. While moans of ecstasy and grunts of pleasure can be simulated, voices offer an opportunity to see (or, rather, hear) the person behind the performance.

Proposition Five: Intellectual analysis must accommodate "Strewth, yeah, suck it". (Dialogue in pornography)

The title of this proposition borrows from McKee's (1999) essay on Australian gay male pornography, and contains a line of dialogue taken from *Jackaroos: An Australian Outback Adventure* (Bjorn, K. 1991). This phrase articulates both the

potential uses and the criticisms of dialogue in pornography. “Strewth⁹, yeah, suck it” underscores both the geographical location and cultural context of *Jackaroos*, while also illustrating the hyperbolic and often comedic dimension of much of the language used in pornographic films. So recognisable is the type of dialogue commonly found in pornography that Cante and Restivo (2001) claim,

There are other sound conventions in porn that are easily noticeable and recognizable even to the novice viewer: one of them being a particular use of language we will call “pornoperformativity”. (221)

Similar to the music used in pornography, porn dialogue is conventionally understood as being something of an afterthought. In the absence of any critical work that specifically targets porn dialogue, we postulate several reasons as to why dialogue in pornography receives less attention than in other cinematic forms.

Firstly, as Escoffier (2003) points out, porn directors commonly work ‘from a script that is more like a storyboard or a “treatment” than a conventional script’ (551), privileging action over dialogue. Secondly, and as previously stated, performers are selected based on looks and physical attributes rather than the ability to deliver scripted lines convincingly. Finally, dialogue may well be dubbed into different languages in an attempt to widen the market for the text or dubbed in the same language to overcome the ‘challenges’ of less than masculine vocal performance. Even when a different language is not used, dialogue may still be repeated and laid over the visual track during post-production.

There is also a concern with the politics of that dialogue or, more precisely, what such dialogue can reveal about the politics of pornography (see, for instance, Stoltenberg, 1991; MacKinnon, 1993). In gay porn, for instance, sexual ‘commands’ are regularly issued in a manner that is highly gendered, privileging the active / penetrative partner. References to “mancunts”¹⁰ in advertising for recent DVDs, twinned with the popularity of (user-generated) tags such as “sluts”, “whores”, “boy sluts”, “pussies” and “bitches” on sites such as *RedTube* and *Pornohub*, serve as a reminder of the

⁹ ‘Strewth’ being a clichéd verbal signifier of Australian identity.

¹⁰ See the 2010 film ‘Mancunt Breeders’ (Trigger Men) for evidence.

misogyny that pervades much pornographic discourse. Meanwhile, pornography can also be site of intense racial stereotyping, which again gets articulated through language. The *MachoFucker* website provides ample evidence of this describing, for instance, the star of *Jamaican Steel* as a ‘stallion’ and a ‘young bull from Kingston’ (*MachoFucker – Jamaican Steel*).

While the dialogue that features in much commercial pornography conforms to stereotypes, dismissing *all* dialogue in pornography as hyperbolic or inauthentic overlooks more subtle cues and registers at work. Dialogue in gay male pornography is not universal. Diverse registers and vocabularies operate across genres and different types of speech are deployed in order to both aid generic identification and add to the pleasure one gains from such identification. One wouldn’t, for example, expect the prototypical boy next door to talk *too* dirty during sex or indeed, too much. Verbosity in porn is not often attributed to younger actors, though there are of course always exceptions (Tristan Paris, Joey Stefano even Kevin Williams...).

Conversely, the use of gruff sexualised language by a leather daddy may in fact *add* to a BDSM scene, rather than detract from it. To repeat, depending on context, style and convention, porn dialogue can offer the consumer both generic pleasures and generic identifications.

And even when that dialogue might be inaccessible owing to language barriers, this may in fact serve to underscore the authenticity of the text. For example, the consumer’s belief that they are watching a group of Brazilian men have sex might well be enhanced if the language that they speak during sex is incomprehensible. Given this fact, the content of such dialogue matters little. Indeed our lack of understanding may well be important in such instances.

Even where the dialogue is understandable – and stereotypically “ pornospeak ” – pleasure can still be identified. Hallam (2004) writes of this, stating that,

I love tapes with words, the awkward dialogue. Sometimes the performer will introduce himself to another performer, or directly to the camera (and thus to you the viewer). Often, the dialogue is in a

language that I don't understand or it's simply a verbally embarrassed performance or the shoddy sound quality makes it impossible to hear.
(64)

The awkwardness that Hallam describes here may well be part of the erotic appeal for some viewers. In some respects such awkwardness highlights a vulnerability within the performers and, in doing so, suggests a 'breaking through' of the person from behind the performance. In these ways, we argue that dialogue *can* be an important contributing factor in both the understanding and enjoyment of the pornographic text. Indeed, as our sixth and final proposition illustrates, sometimes dialogue is all that matters.

Proposition Six: Sometimes 'Big Errol's' voice is all you need. (Voice only pornography)

Our final proposition in this paper concerns a pornographic form that predates the Internet, DVD and VHS technologies, yet continues to exist today. In spite of its longevity it remains a relatively understudied medium of pornography. Advertisements for adult chat lines have been a staple of pornographic magazines and classified listings since the 1960s.

Such services continue to exist and are advertised alongside live interactive chat in gay magazines. These stories are often framed as confessions, secrets or recollections of a particular fantasy and regularly employ a solo performer and a first-person narrative. Beyond the occasional inclusion of some 'contextual' sound in the introductory moments, such monologues rely solely on the vocal talents of the performer and the narrative they contrive during their performance. An example from a recently advertised¹¹ service will allow us reflect upon the workings of sound-only porn.

¹¹ The example used was taken from an advertisement that appeared in *Attitude* magazine in April 2010. *Attitude* is a gay monthly magazine published in the United Kingdom by Northern and Shell.

Reflecting Britain's obsession with class and class transgression, *Sally-Teens* is a website and telephone service dedicated to eroticising a particular brand of youthful working class masculinity. The 'sally' and the 'chav' have been constructed within British popular culture as despised symbols of an 'incorrect' or 'inauthentic' working class identity (Brewis & Jack, 2010 and Nayak, 2006). In the same way that punks (Healy, 1996), bikers (Mercer, 2003) and cowboys (Carpenter, 2013) have previously undergone a process of queer appropriation, the Chav and the Sally have become fetishized objects of desire within gay male culture (Johnson, 2008), occupying an unstable position somewhere between abject identity and desired object. *Sally-Teens* offers consumers the opportunity to listen to pornographic fantasies involving young men having sex. The twenty-five stories advertised by the company provide a range of sexual scenarios, the titles of which seek to guide the caller's choice:

*'Sally mates grabbing each other's c*cks'*

'Lad (18+) checked out me dick & got well 'ard'

'Let DSS bloke shag me for me crisis loan'

Dialling one line - 'Me gang play with our stiff d**ks outside the late shop' - offers the caller the following introduction:

[[orgasmic moaning]]

"uh, I'm 'avin' a wank, yeah, thinkin' about you pickin' me up from a gang a scallies. You pick me up from a gang a scallies. We're all hangin' around on the street corner. You're walkin' past like you always do cos your fuckin' crazy for these scallies aren't ya? You get off lookin' at us standin' on the street corners wiv our hands down the front of our trackie bottoms, messin' about with our big sweaty, sally cocks.

Along with the colloquial language and references to clothing and leisure practices, the vocal performance of the narrator is key to the construction of this pornographic fantasy. The performer uses a generically northern accent that could be located anywhere between Manchester and West Yorkshire. Within the (middle-class, Southern) cultural imagination, accents from the north of England are commonly

associated with working-class identities (Hoggart, 1957, Abbott 1965). Indeed, the word ‘scally’ is a specifically Northern term for a particular brand of working-class masculinity.¹² The use of accent here serves to secure the ‘authenticity’ of the first-person narrative and heighten the ‘erotic capital’ (Hakim, 2011) of the text. Within the intimate communicative space of the telephone call, accent, timbre, pitch and register all play a role in the success (or failure) of the narrator in constructing a ‘believable’ erotic encounter.

The voice on the other end of the sex line operates in the same way as the female voice does in the much earlier phenomenon of ‘blue discs’ and Smith (2005), identifies how the pornographic voice operates in such texts, writing that the female performer uses ‘her voice in a structuring way at the same time that her voice becomes an audiofetish’ (p.34). Through accent, language, verbal and non-verbal sound and proximity, the ‘scally’ on the telephone recording materialises a similar duality – structuring the intimate aural space created by telephone technology as a sexual one, and simultaneously becoming the object of that space, the erotic signifier that fills that space; the reason for dialling up and listening in. In this way and in the absence of visual cues, the performer’s voice becomes a metonym for the object of desire (the imagined embodied scally of the narrative) *and* an object of desire in itself. King (1996) identifies this duality when he writes that the (female) tele-sex performer ‘who seduces is the subject of the encounter, but to seduce she must become its object; the agent must become not the doer of action but rather the site/cite/sight of action (96-97).

Finally, and with reference to Osvaldo’s (2010) work on the Polk Theatre in Queens, New York, attention should be drawn to the quality of these pornographic recordings. Lacking the polish and ‘cleanliness’ offered by hi-fidelity audio equipment, these narratives exploit the scratchiness of cheaper recording technologies in order to heighten the intensity of the performance and the overall experience of consumption.

¹² <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/scally>

CLOSING THOUGHTS

At the end of a piece that announced in its title that it was trading in speculations, it would be both inappropriate to be unduly conclusive. All we have tried to do here is to release the study of pornography from the ocular hegemony under which it still overwhelmingly labours. Pornography, as we hope we have shown, is heard as well as seen, it invites the ear alongside the eye, its erotics incorporate acoustics.

We invite others to further investigate the sonics of porn, whether that be through extending, refining and problematising the sound-categories we have sketched above, or identifying, exploring and reflecting on other links entirely. For one thing, these linkages between the auditory and the sexually stimulating can be found in media genres other than pornography, not to mention in the sonic textures of everyday life, where the timbre or inflection in an encountered voice can, for example, usher carnal thoughts into the most mundane of encounters (one of the authors of this piece recently found it hard to focus on the useful information delivered by a tour guide because of the alluring velvet burr of his Scottish accent). In cultural zones beyond the strictly pornographic sphere, one could consider the seductive voice of the Hollywood romance's leading man¹³, the charged and febrile musical scores of melodrama, the horror-heroine's scream which pivots on an axis between doomed and desirous; these are all points of contact between sound, music and the sexual.

The readers of this journal, though, are most likely to keep their focus on how, why and with what effect sound in general and certain sounds in particular work and signify in the texts, sub-genres, spaces and consumption practices of the pornographic. (And of course our concentration here on gay men and the porn-sound couplets specific to us leaves open and unmapped vast fields occupied by other sexual subjectivities.) It is exceedingly unlikely that the sonic will ever be placed on an equal footing with the visual, that there will be a rash of studies that put 'dirty listenings' on a par with 'dirty looks', and even having written this article, we are not at all sure that such an equalising of the eroticised senses would be feasible or justifiable. Nevertheless, as the existence of sound-only porn texts suggests and as

¹³ See, for instance, Mercer's recent work on Rock Hudson, 2015.

our outlining of the role of sound in visual porn throughout this piece has hopefully shown, to leave the heard and the listened-to completely out of the pornographic equation is equally misguided. There is much to consider; all we have to do is keep our ears open.

Bibliography

- Abbott J (1965) 'Students' social Cclass in three northern universities' *The British Journal of Sociology* 16 (3): 206 – 220.
- Attwood, F (ed.) (2010) *Porn.com: Making sense of online pornography*. Peter Lang, 2010.
- Branston, G (1995) '... viewer, I Listened to Him... voices, Masculinity, In the Line of Fire.' Kirkham, P and Thumin, J (eds.) *Me Jane: Masculinity, Movies and Women*. London, Palgrave: 37-50.
- Brewis J and Jack G (2010) 'Consuming chavs: the ambiguous politics of gay chavinism' *Sociology* 44 (2): 251 – 268.
- Bull M and Back L (2003) 'Introduction: Into sound' *The auditory culture reader*. New York: Berg, 1-18.
- Cante, R and Restivo A (2001) 'The Voice of Pornography' in Tinkcom, M and Villarego, A (eds). *Keyframes* New York: Routledge.
- Carpenter P J (2013) *The cowboy and his shadow: queering masculinity in the Reagan-Bush era*. (dissertation) [online] available at: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/4dx1m574>. (accessed 26 February 2015).
- Connell J and Gibson C (2003) *Sound tracks: Popular music identity and place*. London: Routledge.
- Corbett J & Kapsalis T (1996) 'Aural sex: the female orgasm in popular sound' *TDR* 40 (3) *Experimental Sound & Radio*: 102-111.
- Dean, T (2009) *Unlimited intimacy: Reflections on the subculture of barebacking*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Dyer, R (1985) 'Male gay porn: Coming to terms. *Jump Cut* 30: 27-29.
- Dyer, R (1994) 'Idol thoughts: orgasm and self-reflexivity in gay pornography' *Critical Quarterly* 36(1): 49-62.
- Escoffier, J (2003) 'Gay-for-pay: straight men and the making of gay pornography' *Qualitative Sociology* 26(4): 531-555.
- Frith S (1996) "Music and identity." Hall S & DuGay P (eds.) *Questions of cultural identity*: 108-27.
- Gaines, J (2004) 'Machines That Make the Body Do Things' in Church Gibson, P (ed.) *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power*. London: BFI: 31–44.
- Gorbman, C (1987) *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*. Indiana University Press.

- Hall, A C and Bishop, J (eds.) (2007) *Pop-porn: pornography in American culture*. Praeger Publishers.
- Hallam, P (2004) 'If you look at it long enough...' in Morrison, T G (ed.) *Eclectic Views on Gay Male Pornography*. London, Routledge: 59 – 74.
- Haslop C, Hill H and Schmidt RA (1998) 'The gay lifestyle-spaces for a subculture of consumption.' *Marketing Intelligence & Planning* 16 (5): 318-326.
- Healy M (1996) *Gay skin : class, masculinity and queer appropriation* London : Cassell.
- Hoggart, R (1957) *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life*. Transaction.
- Ihde D (2012) The auditory dimension. Sterne J (ed.) *The Sound Studies Reader*. London: Routledge. 23 – 28.
- Johnson P (2008) '“Rude boys”: the homosexual eroticization of class' *Sociology* 42 (1): 65 – 82.
- King, C R (1996) 'The siren scream of telesex: speech, seduction and simulation' *Journal of popular culture* 30 (3): 91 – 101.
- Laughey D (2006) *Music and youth culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Mackinnon, K (1993 [1996]) *Only Words*. Harvard University Press.
- Magnet, S (2007) 'Feminist sexualities, race and the internet: an investigation of suicidegirls. com.' *New Media & Society* 9(4): 577-602.
- McKee A (1999) 'Australian gay porn videos The national identity of despised cultural objects' *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2 (2):178-198.
- Mercer J (2003) 'Homosexual prototypes: repetition and the construction of the generic in the iconography of gay pornography' *Paragraph* 26 (1-2): 280-290.
- Mercer, J (2004) 'In the slammer: The myth of the prison in American gay pornographic video' *Journal of homosexuality* 47 (3-4): 151-166.
- Mercer, J (2015) *Rock Hudson*. British Film Institute.
- Merck, M (1987) 'Pornography.' *Looking On*: 151-61.
- Morris, P and Paasonen, S (2014) 'Risk and Utopia A Dialogue on Pornography.' *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 20(3): 215-239.
- Morrison, T G (2004) "He Was Treating Me Like Trash, and

I Was Loving It ...” Perspectives on Gay Male Pornography’ *Journal of Homosexuality* 7 (3-4): 167-183.

Mowlabocus, S (2010) *Gaydar Culture: Gay Men, Technology and Embodiment in the Digital Age*. London: Ashgate.

Nayak A. (2006) ‘Displaced masculinities: Chavs, youth and class in the post-industrial city’ *Sociology* 40 (5): 813 – 831.

Nikunen, K, Paasonen, S & Saarenmaa, L (eds.) (2007) *Pornification and the Education of Desire*. London, Berg.

Osvaldo O (2010) ‘Last recording of porn palace’ *Sounding Out!* [online] <http://soundstudiesblog.com/2010/05/27/last-recording-of-a-porn-palace/> (accessed 26 February 2015).

Paasonen S (2010) *Carnal resonance: affect and online pornography*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Patton, C (1991). ‘Safe Sex and the Pornographic Vernacular’ in *Bad Object Choices* (ed.) *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*. Seattle, Bay Press.

Smith, J (2005) ‘Filling the embarrassment of silence: Erotic performance on “blue discs”’ *Film Quarterly*, 58 (2): 26 – 35.

Stoltenberg, J (1991) ‘Gays and the Pro-pornography Movement: Having the Hots for Sex Discrimination’ in *Men Confront Pornography* edited by M.S. Kimmel. New York: Meridian, 248-262.

Williams, L (1993) ‘A provoking agent: the pornography and performance art of Annie Sprinkle.’ *Social Text*. 37:117-133.

Williams, L (1999) *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "frenzy of the Visible"*. Univ. of California Press.

Williams, L (2004) *Porn studies*. Duke University Press.

Williams, L (2008) *Screening sex*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Williams P J (2006) ‘Authentic identities: straightedge subculture, music, and the Internet’ *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35 (2): 173-200.

DVDs & Television

| *Caesar’s Hard Hat Gangbang* [DVD] Dir. Chi Chi La Rue, USA 2000.

Coronation Street, [ITV] Aired February 27th 1995

Gruff Stuff [DVD] Dir. John Rutherford. USA, 2008.

Jackaroos: An Australian Outback Adventure [DVD] Dir. Kristen Bjorn, USA, 1991

Lukas in Love [DVD] Dir. George Duroy. Slovakia, 2005.

When Harry Met Sally [DVD] Dir. Rob Reiner, 1989.

Web

Broke Straight Boys website

<http://www.brokestraightboys.com> [online] Accessed 4th August 2015.

Chaosmen – Aric

http://www.chaosmen.com/showgal.php?g=groups/7901/6_1&s=34 [online]
Accessed 4th August 2015.

COLT website - <http://www.coltstudiogroup.com/en/scene/COLT-Icons---Steve-Kelso/49641> [online] Accessed 19th June 2015.

Datalounge website

<https://www.datalounge.com/thread/11693372-paddy-o-brian> [online] Accessed 5th August 2015.

‘Jerking while Mom’s watching TV’ (video)

<http://www.xtube.com/watch.php?v=EVNiz-G162-#.VcCpDBNVhBc>
[online] Accessed 4th August 2015.

Jay’s Straight Guys website

<http://www.jaysstraightguys.com/> [online] accessed 4th August 2015.

Kristianbjorn.com <http://kristenbjorn.com/web/model/store/detail-194-Strangers-in-Prague-2>. [online] Accessed 19th June 2015.

MachoFucker Website

<http://www.machofucker.com/freepreview/movie.php?movie=ss5v62ar> [online]
Accessed 4th August 2015.

MachoFucker – Jamaican Steel

<http://www.machofucker.com/freepreview/performer.php?performer=34> [online]
Accessed 5th August 2015.

Queerity website

<http://www.queerty.com/paddy-obrian-may-be-the-hottest-man-to-ever-take-a-cold-shower-20140313> [online] Accessed 5th August 2015.

Straight Rentboys website

<http://www.straightrentboys.com/gay-for-pay-videos.html?nats=MTAwNDUuMi4yMy4yMy4wLjAuMC4wLjA> [online] accessed 4th August 2015.